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THE GLASTONBURY PASSAGES IN THE *PERLESVAUS*

BY WILLIAM A. NITZE

Scholars have been skeptical with reference to an early, twelfth century association of Glastonbury with the Grail Legend, and apparently with good reason. Crestien de Troyes' *Perceval* shows no such connection, and the expression *vau d'Avaron* used by Robert de Borron (3123, 3221) while identified by Newell (*PMLA.*, xviii (1903), 510) with Glastonbury and its propaganda is considered by Foerster (*Wörterbuch*, 182*) to have no great importance.¹ The view repeatedly expressed by Baist,² tho never supported by documentary evidence, that both Robert and the *Perlesvaus* go back to a Latin work, which incorporated the *données* of Crestien and changed his *graal* into a Christian relic, and which was written in Glastonbury, has in general found little favor.³ An article, published by me in *Modern Philology*, i (1903), 247 ff., in which evidence is adduced to show the connection of the *Perlesvaus* with Glastonbury material, has scarcely fared better: Foerster admits the connection but affirms that it is late (183*).

Thus, it has seemed to me worth while to republish this evidence in a somewhat more detailed form, and to show—what I failed to show in 1903—its connection with the supposed discovery of the bodies of Arthur and Guenevere, at Glastonbury, in 1191.

The passages in question are as follows:

1. At the end of the romance, we read in the two extant mss. that are fairly complete:

Li latins⁴ de coi cist estoires fust traite an romanz fu pris an l'ille d'Ava-

¹ In a note Foerster adds (p. 183*): "Man möchte eine Erklärung herausstüfteln, dass die *vau d'Avaron* erst in die zweite Bearbeitung hineingekommen wären, und zwar auf Veranlassung von Glastonbury, wo inzwischen der Josef und vielleicht auch Kristian's Gral bekannt geworden wären." But this is clearly begging the question.

² *Litblt.*, 1892, col. 160, and *ZrP*, xix (1895), 326 ff.

³ See, however, Suchier, *Geschichte der französischen Literatur*, 138.

⁴ I follow the printed text of Potvin (without change), but the text of Hatton 82 is substantially the same. The Welsh text and the incunabula of the *Perlesvaus* lack the passage. As for the remaining mss. they are too fragmentary to make a positive assertion, but the probability is that they ended as above. Cf. Potvin 306.

lon, en une seinte messon de religion qui siet au chief des mores⁶ aventurreeses, là où li roi Artus et la roïne Guenièvre gissent, par le tesmoing de prodomes religieus qui là dedanz sont, qui tote l'estoire en ont, vraie dès le conmancement trèsqu'à la fin.

2. The *Perlesvaus* records several visits to Avalon. The principal of these is that of Lancelot, Potvin 261:

Il chevauche tant qu'il est venuz . . . à une grant valée où il avoit forest d'une part et d'autre, et duroit la valée .x. granz lyeues galesches. Il esgarde à destre desus la monteingne de la valée et voit une chapele novelement feste, qui mout estoit bele et riche, si estoit couverte de plonc et avoit par derrière .ii. coinz qui sanbloient estre d'or. Dejoste cele chapele, avoit .iii. messons moult richement herbergées, et estoit chascune par soi et ainz [tenant]^{6a} la chapele. Il avoit moult biau cimetière a la chapele anviron, qui clos estoit à la ronde de la forest, et descendoit une fontaine, moult clère, de la hautece de la forest, par devant la chapele, et coroit an la valée par grant ravine; et chascune des messons avoit son vergier, et li vergier son clos. Lancelot oï vespres chanter à la chapele, il vit .i. santier qui cele part tournoit; mes la monteingne estoit si roiste que il n'i pot mie aler à cheval, ainz descendî, si le trest par la rène après lui tant qu'il vint près de la chapele.

Here he meets three hermits, who tell him that the place is Avalon. The chapel is richly decorated in the interior and contains two tombs. When Lancelot asks whose they are, he is told:

Por le roi Artus et por la réine Guenièvre—Ja n'est mie morz li rois Artus, feit Lanceloz—Nennil, sire, se Dex plest; mès li cors de la réine gist an cest sarquez devers nos, et an l'autre est li chies son fil, trèsqu'à icele hore que li rois soit finiz . . . mès la réine dist à la mort que l'an méist le cors dejoste le suen quant il fineroit. De ce avons-nos les lestres et son sœul en ceste chapele, et cest leu fist-ele renoveler an tel manière ançois que ele morust.⁶

Lancelot prays all night in the chapel, in front of one of the images of Our Lady, and returns the next day to Cardoil.

3. A visit of Arthur to Guenevere's tomb is briefly told in Potvin 270:

Li rois Artus et misires Gauvains ont tant chevauchié qu'il sont venuz en l'ile de Avalon, la où la roïne gist . . . Mès vos poez bien dire que li rois ne fust mie joieus, quant il vit le sarquez où la réine gissoit et celui où li chief de son fiuz gissoit; adonc renovela ses deus, et dist que cest

⁶ Hatton 82 reads *mares*, which is probably the correct reading.

^{6a} Hatton 82 reads *si joignoient*.

⁶ In the Welsh text, *Y Seint Greal*, I, 679, the chapel is on "a small round mountain."

seint leu de cele seinte chapele doit-il plus amer que touz les autres de sa terre.

It was Arthur himself, however, who caused the "head" of his son, Loho[l]t, to be placed in Avalon, Pot. 222:

Mès, aincois que li rois s'an partist, fist-il le chief porter en l'ille de [A]Valon, en une chapele qui estoit de Nostre Dame, où il avoit un saint hermite preudome qui mout estoit bien de Nostre Seignor.

From the above accounts we see: (1) that the *Perlesvaus* claims to be derived from a Latin work in the Island of Avalon, in a house of religion situate at the head of the adventurous moors. (2) The place is described as located in a large valley, on either side of which there are forests. (3) Here Arthur and Guenevere lie buried, in a Lady Chapel, placed on a hill, so steep that Lancelot's horse cannot climb it. (4) The chapel, recently renovated at the instigation of Guenevere, is venerated by Arthur more than all the others of his land. (5) Close to it is a cemetery and various foundations, including gardens or orchards. There can be no doubt that the author had a very definite locality in mind, and that this locality is Glastonbury.

In the presumably revised text of William of Malmesbury's *De Antiquitate Glastoniensis Ecclesiae*, p. 17,⁷ we read:

Haec itaque insula primo Yniswitrin, a Britonibus dicta, demum ab Anglis, terram sibi subjugantibus, interpretato priore vocabulo, dicta est sua lingua Glastinbiry; vel de Glasteing, de quo praemisimus. Etiam insula Avallonia[el] celebriter nominatur, cuius vocabuli haec fuit origo—and there follows the well-known etymology.

Giraldus Cambrensis, having occasion to paraphrase this passage, *De princ. instruct. VIII*, 128,⁸ writes:

Quae nunc autem Glastonia dicitur, antiquitus Avallonia dicebatur. Est enim quasi insula tota paludibus obsita; unde dicta est Inis Avallon, id est, insula pomifera. Pomis enim, quod *aval* Britannica lingua dicuntur. locus ille quodam abundabat.

Moreover, in the *Gesta Pontificum*, 196, William states:

Glastonia est villa in quodam recessu palustri posita;

⁷ The text is quoted after Newell since Hearne's edition is inaccessible to me. But I have verified the quotations I give in Migne, *Patrologia*, II, 179, 1682 ff. Cf. Lot, *Romania*, XXVII (1898), 530 ff., and Newell, *l. c.*

⁸ The passage is from Giraldus' first book of this work; see ed. Warner, Rolls Series, 1891.

and in another passage, pp. 5-7, of the *De Antiquitate* reference is made to Glastonbury as

quandam insulam silvis, rubis, atque paludibus circumdatam.⁹

So that, not only is the identification of Avalon with Glastonbury established for the close of the twelfth century but the situation of Avalon in a swampy or marshy country—our *mores aventureuses*—is also well-known. In addition, the descriptions of the place fit in with the *forest* and the *vergier* of passage [2] in our text.

Coming now to the specific Arthurian material, the *De Antiquitate*, pp. 42-44, states that the bodies of Arthur and his queen lie between two pyramids in the cemetery of the monks:

Quantum vero Galastoniae ecclesia fuerit etiam primatibus patriae venerabilis, ut ibi potissimum sub protectione Dei genetricis operirentur diem resurrectionis, multa sunt iudicio quibus pro cautela fastidii, abstineo. Praetermitto de Arturo, inclito rege Britonum, in cimiterio monachorum inter duas piramides cum sua conjugi tumulato, de multis etiam Britonum principibus.

Newell, *l. c.* argues plausibly that the last sentence belongs to the “recast” and not to the *De Antiquitate* proper. Since the recast of the *De Antiquitate* was certainly made before the year 1200, this problem does not concern us here. Suffice it to note that Newell thinks (p. 510) that the revision was accomplished in the very year of Arthur’s supposed disinterment. The date of this event is 1191, as related in the *Chronica Majora*¹⁰ and in Giraldus Cambrensis. The latter, who gives the more interesting account, and who writes as an eye-witness, says, *op. cit.* 126:

Arthuri quoque Britonum regis inlyti memoria est non supprimenda, quem monasterii Glastoniensis egregii, cuius et ipse patronus suis diebus fuerat praecipuus et largitor ac sublevator magnificus, historiae multum extollunt. Prae cunctis enim ecclesiis regni sui sanctae Dei genetricis Mariae Glastoniensem ecclesiam plus dilexit et praeceteris longe majori devotione promovit. . . . Hujus autem corpus, quod quasi phantasticum in fine. . . . his nostris diebus apud Glastoniam inter lapideas pyramides duas, in coemiterio sacro quondam erectas, profundius in terra quercu concava reconditum, et signatum miris indiciis et quasi miraculosis, est inventum, et in ecclesiam cum honore translatum marmoreoque decenter tumulo commendatum. Unde et crux plumbea lapide supposito, non

⁹ See, also, the passage quoted by Lot, *op. cit.* 537.

¹⁰ See Newell, *op. cit.* 505, note.

superius ut [nostris] solet diebus, [sed] inferiori potius ex parte infixa, quam nos quoque vidimus, namque tractavimus litteras has insculptas et non eminentes et extantes, sed magis interius ad lapidem versas, continebat: "Hic jacet sepultus rex Arthurus cum Wenneuereia vxore sua secunda in insula Auallonia."

Giraldus makes the further statement that the find came as the result of a long search on the part of abbot Henry, who was guided by documents, by semi-legible letters on the pyramids, and by the vision of monks. Here, then, we have a definite statement that the bodies of Arthur and Guenevere, after being found in the cemetery at Glastonbury, were transferred to the Church of St. Mary, which Arthur loved beyond all others. The significance of this statement for the *Perlesvau* "saute aux yeux."

In the twelfth century, Glastonbury possessed three churches: that of St. Mary, the oldest, which was rich in relics, and of which William, in the *Gesta Regum*, 37, said:

Sicut in regno Britanniae est prima, et fons et origo totius religionis, ita et ipsa supereminentem privilegii obtineat dignitatem:

that of the Apostles Peter and Paul which adjoined St. Mary's and was much larger; and that of St. Michael de Torre, a dependent church, which stood on a height now called the Tor, outside of Glastonbury. In 1184 a terrible fire destroyed all the buildings of the monastery, except a camera and a bell-tower. Henry II entrusted the work of reconstruction to his chamberlain Radulf. The Church of St. Mary was rebuilt first in its former dimensions and position, but it was now connected with the larger church in the manner of a lady-chapel. In order to provide for the adornment of the new building, relics of the great Glastonbury saints were exhumed from the pavement and deposited in shrines. The rededication occurred in 1186. The Church of SS. Peter and Paul, however, was not finished until the fourteenth century; for in 1189 Henry II died, and owing to a quarrel between the monks and the new abbot the work on it languished, in spite of the usual resort to indulgences and the exhibition of relics by travelling monks. As said above, it was in 1191 that the bodies of Arthur and Guenevere were exhumed and deposited in the newly rebuilt Lady Chapel.

Thus, what can be clearer than that the author of the *Perlesvau* in his account of the tombs of Arthur and Guenevere in the Lady Chapel of Avalon, which, he says, Arthur "loved more than all the

others of his land," is referring to the event recorded for 1191? To be sure, the Church of St. Mary was not situated on the Tor, and it would seem that the eminence which Lancelot mounts is indeed this hill, inasmuch as it is in many respects the most distinctive feature on the Glastonbury landscape [see Dugdale, *Monasticon*, 1], and one certain to strike the visitor's eye. But we must not demand too great accuracy from the writer of a romance; and where there are so many striking agreements this single departure from the truth is of no great importance. St. Mary's was the Glastonbury church, *par excellence*, our author mentions no other by name, it is thus not strange that he should place this church in the most prominent place of the scene he is describing.

As for the subsidiary traces of Glastonbury influence in our work, the reference to Josephus as the author of the Latin original is possibly one. Certainly another is the use of the name *Glaïs* for the grandfather of Perceval, the father of Alain li gros and his eleven brothers; cf., in the undoubtedly authentic portion of the *De Antiquitate*, the mention of *Glast*, the eponymous founder of the place, and his twelve brothers (really his descendants). I still think that Pelles is the Welsh *Pwyll*, as Loholt¹¹ is certainly the Welsh *Llacheu*, and Pannenoisance is probably *Penzance*—altho Professor Bruce has a different explanation of Pelles, based on the Grail-Lancelot Cycle, an explanation which is to appear shortly. On all these points I refer the reader to my previous study [*MP* 1 (1903)] and to an article, about to be published, on the dating of the *Perlesvaus*. I may anticipate the latter in so far as to say that the date of the original—whether Latin or not, I am not prepared to state¹²—was composed close to 1200¹³; for in the light

¹¹ Crestien mentions the name once, in *Erec*, 1732.

¹² In my dissertation, *The Old French Grail Romance Perlesvaus*, Baltimore, 1902, p. 101, note, I expressed the view that the Latin original is a fiction. In *MP*, 1, 257, I reversed this opinion. On the whole, I am now inclined to think my first view correct. But certainty in such a matter is not possible; and much can be said in favor of Baist's hypothesis, see *MP*, XIII (1916), 185 ff. and Suchier, *op. cit.*, 138. If Robert, as Baist and Suchier both seem to think, used a Latin Grail-book, then the *vau d'Avaron* of Robert and the *grant valée* of the *Perlesvaus* might be derived from this source. In any case, the last sentence of my article in *MP*, 1, should be corrected.

¹³ This date does, of course, not hold for the Brussels ms. of the French

of the facts given above it seems improbable that the *Perlesvaus* was composed at any great interval from the rebuilding of St. Mary's as the Lady Chapel, in 1184, and the interment of the supposed Arthur and Guenevere there, in 1191, both of which events the romance reflects, as we have seen. Finally, the *vauis d'Avaron* of Robert de Borron and the *grant valée* in the *Perlesvaus'* description of Avalon obviously represent the same locality.

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text. Incidentally, let me say that Suchier's statement (*op. cit.*, 169) is incorrect; Hatton 82 is in many respects a more nearly complete ms of the *Perlesvaus* than the Brussels text.